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CENTRAL FLORIDA PRESBYTERY POLICY

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SEPARATION ETHICS: WHEN PASTOR AND CONGREGATION SAY GOODBYE

I. PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

The pastoral relationship is very important, *and* often deeply personal to people in a congregation. In all the dimensions of pastoral relationship there are elements of trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, caring and love.

Because of the sensitivity of the pastoral relationship, it is imperative that the departing pastor assume particular responsibilities and observe necessary modes of behavior. This will allow the congregation to be free, in all respects, to make the adjustments necessary to changes of leadership, *both* interim and permanent.

This policy is intended to provide assistance to those who find themselves facing the situation of pastor and congregation saying "Goodbye."

II. THE GUIDELINES

A. SAYING GOODBYE

The need to say goodbye to a congregation occurs for one of several reasons. Whatever the cause, it becomes the occasion when pastor and congregation find they must say goodbye.

1. To Accept a Call a Distance Away

When a pastor accepts a call to a ministry a distance from the current congregation, questions arise as to what is appropriate and helpful to the congregation and the interim and *subsequent* pastors. **It is always incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that her or his relationship with the congregation *has ended*.**

This is necessary in order that the congregation be free to make the adjustments necessary for changes of leadership, *both* interim and permanent, without the departing pastor's influence.

2. But Remaining a Neighbor

When a pastor says goodbye and remains nearby, there are sensitive aspects of separation which require attention on the part of the departing pastor.

It is best for the pastor to move out of the community. However, this is not always possible or advisable. **Thus, it is important when a departing pastor and/or his or her spouse remains in the community that the departing pastor and spouse should not be a part of the worship or fellowship life of the congregation except upon the initiative and invitation of the interim or next installed pastor.**

3. Saying Goodbye When One Is Elected Pastor Emeritus

When a pastor retires, the congregation may bestow upon him or her the **honorific** title of Pastor Emeritus.

To elect one as pastor or associate pastor emeritus:

- ✓ is evidence of a long and loving, mutually caring pastoral relationship
- ✓ is a congregation's way of saying to the church-at-large and to the world that they love this person and are thankful for his or her time with them
- ✓ is a gift to the retired pastor which says something special to him or her

However, the pastoral relationship has been dissolved. The relationship of to people has ended and there is no expectation of the person to be present with the congregation because of the election. **All expectations regarding the separation of a former pastor of a congregation also apply to a pastor emeritus.**

B. RESPONSIBILITIES IN SAYING GOODBYE

The values which are important to consider during this often highly charged experience of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship are:

- ✓ effective leadership
- ✓ congregational health and stability
- ✓ the growth of pastor and members in dealing with the pain, the problems, and the possibilities of separation
- ✓ the ability of the session and congregation to move positively and effectively toward the next phase of their life together

These values instruct the conduct and responsibilities of both the pastor and the congregation regarding their separation. **The pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and, therefore, the one who has the responsibility for making sure that the separation that occurs is anticipated and carried out with foresight and effectiveness.**

1. Responsibilities of the Departing Pastor

It is important that the departing pastor, in any dissolution, assume certain responsibilities to the former congregation, to individual members of that congregation, and to the interim and next installed pastors.

a. To the Congregation:

When the date has been set for the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the departing pastor must take the lead in preparing the congregation for separation.

A letter should be addressed to the members of the congregation spelling out clearly the matters of the separation and the time that follows. A sermon should be preached containing references to the approaching separation and speaking to these matters. In conversation with people in the congregation, it is important that the following matters *be* understood:

- 1) That all pastoral and professional relationships and responsibilities of the pastor with the congregation will end as of the effective date of the dissolution;
- 2) That the pastor will not be involved in any way in the selection process of either the interim pastor or the next installed pastor. Neither will he or she be involved in any way with the selection of any search team or pastor nominating committee.

- 3) That the pastor, after leaving, will not become engaged in conversations which, in any way, offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the interim or any subsequent installed pastors;
- 4) That any desire on the part of members of the congregation for the departing pastor to participate in congregational life or services should be discussed with the interim pastor or subsequent installed pastor;
- 5) That the departing pastor may participate in a wedding or funeral of the congregation after the date of dissolution only by invitation of the interim pastor or installed pastor who shall be the officiant. Former pastors will not be invited to preside at baptisms.

b. To Individual Members of the Congregation:

It is important that, with particular friends, it be made clear that the pastoral relationship will come to an end. This does not mean that friendships must come to an end, but there is special responsibility on the part of the departing pastor to prevent friendships from becoming confused with the pastoral relationship.

The pastoral functions of counseling, calling, conducting weddings, funerals or baptisms are not appropriate. The rendering of opinions or judgments about the ministry of the former church or its pastor is not appropriate. **It is the responsibility of the departing pastor to see that this is communicated.**

If the former pastor receives a request to return to the congregation for a particular occasion, it is important for him or her to remind those making the request that the present pastor is the one to whom the request should be made.

It is not appropriate for the former pastor to comment on the "state of the congregation." Therefore, in any social context, where the former pastor is with friends or other members of the former congregation, it is the responsibility of the former pastor to be sure that he or she voices no criticism or evaluative comments about the new *pastoral* leadership of the congregation.

c. With Regard to Social Media:

The above guidelines also apply to the use of any social media.

d. To the Interim and Subsequent Installed Pastors:

The former pastor has a responsibility to the interim pastor and to subsequent installed pastors to make sure that any requests that come to him or her for services in the former congregation be redirected by the requesters to the interim pastor or installed pastor.

It is important that, when any request comes to the former pastor, she or he be in touch with the current pastor to let it be known what contacts have been made with her or him. No pastoral functions of any kind are to be performed by the former pastor without the prior invitation or request of the current pastor.

Should any community non-church function call the former pastor back into the community for public appearance of whatever nature, as a courtesy, the former pastor should inform the current pastor of the fact and nature of the occasion.

2. Responsibilities of the Session

a. To the Departing Pastor:

Following the Pastor's decision to request dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the session can give support and encouragement to the pastor in the implementation of the decision.

It will be helpful for the session to support and assist the pastor in interpreting the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship to the congregation and, if need be, to the wider community.

As a caring expression of closure, it is appropriate for the session to arrange for an occasion when the pastor and family may formally say goodbye.

b. To the Congregation:

The session will want to be sensitive to the feelings of loss experienced by members of the congregation while demonstrating through their actions the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship.

Additional session leadership may be needed in the transition period so that worship, congregational life and fellowship may continue.

The session can help the members of the congregation by encouraging them to see this time as an opportunity for growth and change. It can be a time for listening to individuals and groups within the congregation. It can be a time for examining present life, ministry and service, and being open to new possibilities. It is important that the congregation be prepared for change with new pastoral leadership.

With the help of the Committee on Ministry, the session should interpret the role of the Committee on Ministry of the presbytery during this transition period. This will involve the naming of a session moderator, the process of obtaining an interim pastor and the process of calling an installed pastor.

3. Responsibilities of the Committee on Ministry

a. To the Departing Pastor:

Upon learning of the pastor's intention to retire or resign, a representative of the Committee on Ministry shall meet with the pastor to discuss these guidelines.

b. To the Session and Congregation:

A Committee on Ministry representative will be present at the meeting of the session when the pastor announces his or her resignation. The purpose of this meeting is to inform the session fully of these guidelines and to orient the session to the process of seeking pastoral leadership following the departure of the present pastor.

A representative of the Committee on Ministry shall be present at the meeting of the congregation when the pastor requests concurrence in the her or his plans to leave, to inform the congregation of the process for obtaining subsequent pastoral leadership.

When a congregation plans to elect a retiring pastor as Pastor Emeritus, an interpretive statement on the meaning of Pastor Emeritus will be sent to the session for use in the congregation.

c. To the Interim and Next Installed Pastors:

It will be important for the Committee on Ministry to review these guidelines with the interim pastor and the next installed pastor and to be available for counsel should any difficulties arise regarding relationships with the former pastor.

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will provide guidance, support and encouragement to pastors, sessions and congregations in those situations in which a pastor and congregation discover that they must say goodbye.

III. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. "Code of Ethics for Presbyterian Ministers." A paper whose source is unknown.
2. "Pastor and Congregation Face Retirement" by R. J. Kirk. From Special Papers and Research: Reports. The Alban Institute, 4215 Nebraska Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20016.
3. "Report from the Task Force on Ministerial Ethics, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery." Adopted by presbytery, February 13, 1990.
4. "Running Through the Thistles." An Alban Institute publication by Roy M. Oswald.
5. "Saying Goodbye, A Time for Growth for Congregations and Pastors." An Alban Institute Publication by Edward A. White.